

SKEPTICS CRITICIZED ON PARANORMAL ISSUE

Scholar Tells Scientists That Occult and U.F.O. Phenomena Merit Legitimate Inquiry

By BOYCE RENSBERGER

One of the scholars who helped start a campaign to investigate reports of paranormal phenomena has split with his former colleagues, contending that the movement became more preoccupied with denouncing such reports than with investigating them fairly.

The scholar, Dr. Marcello Truzzi, a sociologist of science who teaches at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, believes that the study of paranormal phenomena should not be dismissed out of hand.

Dr. Truzzi resigned as editor of the group's magazine, then called *The Zetetic*, and established a new journal whose consulting editors include both skeptics and believers. The older magazine is now called *The Skeptical Inquirer*, and the new one is called *Zetetic Scholar*.

The first group, which calls itself the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, grew out of a widely published denunciation of astrology that was signed by 186 scientists and philosophers in 1975. Its leader, Dr. Paul Kurtz, a professor of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo, maintains that the nation is awash in a rising tide of irrationality and gullible acceptance of reports of occult and paranormal phenomena, and says this portends grave consequences for a society heavily influenced by public opinion.

"This is absolute nonsense," said Dr. Truzzi, the leader of the breakaway group.

Seeking Answers Through Science

Dr. Truzzi said he saw little danger in the current popularity of paranormal matters. The rising interest, he contends, reflects a trend in which believers in these topics are abandoning supernatural explanations and seeking answers through science.

With the demystification of religions, Dr. Truzzi said in a telephone interview, beliefs that used to be the focus of secret societies and mysterious cults are now being tested for natural explanations.

As examples, he cited the work of J. Allen Hynek, an astronomer, to explain unidentified flying objects; J. B. Rhine, a Duke University psychologist, to test extrasensory perception, and Michel Gauquelin, a French psychologist, to test astrology statistically.

"I think this is only healthy," Dr. Truzzi said, adding that he believed many such investigators were dealing with patterns that present legitimate puzzle areas for science.

Opposes 'Outright Condemnation'

"I don't doubt that 99 percent of occultism is empirically false," Dr. Truzzi continued, "but the approach to it has to be based on an examination of the evidence by people qualified to do that, not on outright condemnation. We shouldn't just dismiss these things out of hand."

That, Dr. Truzzi added, is what he believes Dr. Kurtz and his committee is doing.

"The committee is tarring everybody with the same brush," Dr. Truzzi said. "When you do that, you're cutting yourself off from what may not be just a bunch of kooks, but from what I would call a protoscience."

Dr. Kurtz, taking issue with Dr. Truzzi's assertions, said, "We are interested in fair investigations of claims of the paranormal, but we do believe it's important that when claims of the paranormal get wide public attention and belief, the skeptical position also get media attention."

Chief Disagreement Cited

Dr. Kurtz said his chief disagreement with Dr. Truzzi was over how much emphasis to place on reaching the public with skeptical comments on paranormal issues. Dr. Kurtz said this was an important mission of his organization; Dr. Truzzi said he would prefer to establish a credible body of contrary evidence before publicly denouncing something.

When Dr. Truzzi resigned his editorship of *The Zetetic*, Dr. Kurtz and his committee hired a new editor, Kendrick Fraser, formerly an editor of a popular science magazine, to change the magazine's content and format to have greater public appeal.

The address of *The Skeptical Inquirer* is P.O. Box 5, Amherst Branch, Buffalo, N.Y. 14226. Subscriptions are \$10 a year. The address of *Zetetic Scholar*, also \$10 a year, is Department of Sociology, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Mich. 48197.